

North Bruns. students help peers with transition

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NORTH BRUNSWICK — It's never easy for a student to enter a new school district, but the change can be even more intimidating when it also means moving into the minority.

Most white students never experience such a change, but black students moving from an urban district to suburban North Brunswick soon became familiar with what they call the "cultural shock" of moving from the majority to the minority. "When I was in Jersey City, it was all black students and one or two white students," said Alisande McCoard, an 18-year-old junior at North Brunswick High School. "When I came here, I was just this little black person among all these white people. I wasn't scared, but I didn't feel comfortable."

McCoard, who moved to the district two years ago, said she felt lonely and out of place. McCoard is first vice president of the newly formed African-American Society, a group formed in part to help smooth the transition process for minority students.

Laura Fitzgerald, a 17-year-old senior who has lived in North Brunswick most of her life, is the group's president and was one of the driving forces in getting the group started this past October.

"We were noticing that the population of



Marc Ascher/The Home News
Members of the North Brunswick High School African-American Society are, standing, Laura Fitzgerald, president; Phillip Black, and Alisande McCoard, vice president. Seated are Diane Lanier, faculty adviser, and Michael Brazziel.

African-American students at the school has grown a great deal, and many of the students came from schools where most of the population was African-American," Fitzgerald said. "It was cultural shock when they came to North Brunswick because most of the students are white, and they often felt misplaced."

Currently, there are about 110 black students in the high school of 1,200. And although they represent only about 10 percent of the student population, it is a far cry from 1976, when only five African-American students were in the school, according to group adviser Diane Lanier, who is also a teacher at the school.

Lanier had served as adviser to an African-American club that started in 1976, but it broke up after several months because of lack of participation. The new group has not had that problem, and already has 34 active members. Monthly meetings have drawn crowds of up to 53 students.

In addition to serving as a support network, the group strives to educate members and other interested students about African-American history and culture — something they say is lacking in standard American history books.

"They're not doing a very good job of teaching black history," said group member Philip Black, an 18-year-old senior. "They're just glossing over it. They don't

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tell us what slavery was really like or teach us about men like George Washington Carver or Malcolm X."

Black moved to North Brunswick from Ohio, and said his adjustment was relatively smooth, at least when comparing it to his move from Georgia to Ohio.

When he moved to Ohio from Georgia in the eighth grade, he remembered being the only black in the class. **APR. 23 1990**

"It was a little overwhelming. I felt like I had no one to associate with, and many of them didn't know how to deal with me. That increases tension."

Group member Michael Brazziel, an 18-year-old junior who moved to North Brunswick from New Brunswick three years ago, said he encountered some tension in the early months.

"They look down on you if you're from New Brunswick," Brazziel said. "They automatically think you're bad and fight a lot. It was confusing, because I was always taught to treat people the way I want them to treat me."

All four students said they occasionally feel racial prejudice in the school, particularly when it comes

to racial stereotypes, and they said they are aware that the high school is just a "miniature version of the real world."

"We see the club as a way to help students excel in school, but also to help them later in society as a whole," Fitzgerald said. "We hope to help each other adjust and communicate with others to break down racial barriers and end stereotypes and prejudice."

Lanier said she was glad to see the group formed.

"It gives them a sense of pride, dignity and awareness, so they are able to adjust to an environment that is not as receptive as they may like," Lanier said.

Black contended that the environment is one "where the odds tend to be against a minority group, whether black, Chinese or whatever."

Fitzgerald noted that the white majority might share similar feelings with the minority populations.

"It's just as much a cultural shock to the majority as it is to us," she said, "because now they're exposed to a large number of African-American students, and they might not know how to adjust either. Some may feel intimidated."

The group is open to all students, but so far all members are minorities, Fitzgerald said.